ECUMENICAL SERVICE
DECEMBER 31, 1999
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How good it is to be here together. I can't think of any place I'd rather be

I'm grateful to our friend, and neighbor and brother in Christ, Cardinal George, for his gracious willingness to be here and to share his reflection and insights on this occasion. The fact that he and we choose to end a century and begin a new one ecumenically is stunning, and I am deeply touched and deeply grateful.

I am also grateful to a very good friend and colleague in ministry, Father Robert McLauglin, a man of great faith and hope who, with me, actually hopes that sometime in the 21st century the World Series will be played at Wrigley Field, pastor of Holy Name Cathedral, who with our own John Wilkinson, Associate Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, had a vision for this ecumenical witness and carefully planned the service. Everybody knows that the laity is ahead of church authorities when it comes to ecumenism. And so Holy Name and Fourth Presbyterian share a kind of moveable ecumenical congregation, a small but hearty group of souls who identify with both of us, attend worship and mass - sometimes both on the same Sunday, and who are "Catholic Presbyterians" or "Presbyterian Catholics" and who, even though we're not quite sure what to do with them, just may be showing us a new way to be Christian. Thanks be to God that neither of the churches is nearly as confident as we used to be that such behavior was not only unacceptable but dangerous for the health of your soul and prospects for salvation.

And thank you for your decision to be here this evening and not somewhere else. There is no poverty of alternatives. You could have been on a cruise ship crossing the international dateline at midnight and then doubling back to celebrate the Millenium twice at a cost of $100,000. Or you could be on the Concorde winging your way around the world for $75,000.

I'm glad you're here and you will be too in the morning, considering those prices. Actually 72% of us have decided to stay home and take a pass on the big bash. It even has a name - Y2Kocooning. Trend analyst, Faith Popcorn - who created the concept of cocooning says "many are opting not to go to the big party. They're staying at home hiding under their beds, playing with their cats or dogs or children, and wishing it was 1954" (See *Time*, 11/29/99).

1000 years ago, on the last day of the year 999, the old Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome was thronged with a mass of weeping and trembling worshippers awaiting the end of the world - the dreaded "day of wrath"

when the earth-would dissolve in ashes. Pope Sylvester II, a wise man of great learning and sophistication, who did not share his flock's terror, celebrated a midnight mass for a worried throng, some wearing sackcloth and ashes in penance for their sins, who believed that judgement day was nigh. In fact, a church council, before his papacy, had predicted the end of history, literally, at the end of the Millenium. (*Wall Street Journal*, 12/21/99 George Melloan, *A Lot Has Changed Since 1000, But Not Everything*).

100 years ago, December 31, 1899, the same thing happened. People took out full page ads in Chicago newspapers anticipating the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the world.

Some scientists were predicting that as the clock struck midnight the sun would become solid and go out, leaving the solar system in darkness and the earth a lifeless ice ball. (See *Time* 1/11/99)

Harvard's Harvey Cox, looking back over the 20th century, points out that Marxists were widely confident that they had seen the beginning of the end of religion, and at the other end of the spectrum, a group of progressive Protestants here in Chicago organized a new magazine and called it *The Christian Century*. Neither prediction came true, Cox observes.

In fact, for what it's worth Y2K has already come:

- **at 5:00 a.m. this morning in New Zealand, and the news assured us that the lights and ATM machines were working.**
- **at 9:00 a.m. in Japan**
- **at 10:00 a.m. China, where airline executives were required to be in planes, in flight to show how Y2K ready they are.**
- **12:30 p.m. - India**
- **6:00 p.m. - Britain**

A columnist for the *Wall Street Journal* editorialized a week ago "Probably we will escape once more. Just as those Christians of New Year's 1000 ran out into the streets of Rome and celebrated still being alive, probably we will find out with joy and relief that all the wonders science has created are still in working order."

I look to the past this evening in gratitude. My father told me one time that he wanted to live long enough to see it - see the 21st Century. He didn't, but I did and I'm grateful for him tonight and for the gift of being alive at this extraordinary moment.

I'm grateful for history: for those who preceded us - our families, our civic leaders who built this city strong and vital and hopeful. For people who believed deeply and gave their lives to the church - this church, Holy Name Cathedral - all the churches.

And as the calendar changes and we learn to say 2000 instead of 1999 - I'm grateful for the Christian content of those 1000 years. Martin Marty published a Millennial Balance Sheet, analyzing Christian faith's contribution to history.

From a small band of followers 2000 years ago we have grown to 2.2 billion adherents, 33% of the world's population. Our record is a long way from perfection.

As dominators and rulers we have been no better or worse than Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus. "The record of Holy Wars, Jihads and Human Sacrifice is ecumenical" Marty observes.

But the good news is that Christian faith has given very significant gifts to the world: modern liberty, for instance.

- **The modern concept of liberty is from Catholic notions of human dignity and the Protestant impulse for freedom of conscience.**

- **An artistic heritage, without which Western Civilization is not conceivable, from Gregorian Chant to J.S. Bach, from Boticelli to Michelangelo.**

- **A Healing Influence. In the year 1000 the only healing institutions in England were Monastery Infirmaries where the infirm and old were welcome and cared for. Throughout the world, current health care systems grew from 19th century missionary hospitals in Korea, Thailand, Zaire, Zimbabwe.**

- **The Liberation of the Mind. The only schools in England in 1000 were in the monasteries. Christian faith gave the western world the first universities and organized the vast majority of colleges and universities in the New World.**

- **Martyrs and Mystics from Frances of Assisi to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Martin Luther King, Jr. to Mother Teresa.**

- **Notions of justice and mercy, which sooner or later hold the body politic to account for civil rights, equal justice, health care and education for all.**

I'm grateful for that as one Millenium evolves into another.

And as we look forward, I do so with confidence and hope, but also a sense of vocation and duty.

Unfortunately, most of the public religious rhetoric about the Millenium has been the same genre as the "dread of the end" which surfaced 1000 and 100 years ago.

My friend Joanna Adams said recently that the world is loaded with millenialists drooling over the prospect of the end of the world and it can't come too soon for them. Joanna tells about seeing a sign in front of a bait shop on a country road in Georgia. "Smile, Your God is a consuming fire." "That is not a thought that puts a smile on my face," she quipped. (See 11/29/99 *The End of History as We Know It*, a sermon.)

That kind of apocalypticism has been part of our tradition for 2000 years. But tonight, looking forward, let it be said here that this overwhelming testimony of our scripture, and our tradition and our experience, is that God loves the world. God loves the world so much that God sent God's only son - not to condemn the world, but to save the world. Of course, history doesn't always reflect God's love and of course we human beings regularly disappoint and confound our creator. But let it be said, in confidence this evening, that our God is a God of love, that God's judgement is an expression of God's love. Let it be said here, that far more important to Christians than the millenium, is the event we celebrated a week ago - the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, the birth of God's love and mercy and grace into our history.

And as we look forward, let us do so in gratitude for the diversity and pluralism in which we live and which will intensify in the future. The challenge before us, Catholics and Protestants, is to hold on to our truth claims with integrity - but also respect those whose truth claims are different, and who hold on to theirs with as much tenacity and commitment, as we hold ours. We Protestants and Catholics are no longer the whole show. So let us live into the future with a new openness to one another and a new openness to the possibility that diversity is a gift of God to be embraced, not overcome, and that this multi-colored, multi-faith emerging society just may be part of God's will for creation.

And let us live into the future ecumenically. This service would not and could not have happened 100 years ago, or even 40 years ago. There were wonderful exceptions, but many of us here this evening were taught to eye one another suspiciously, to regard one another as somehow less than fully Christian, and our church something less than the church of Jesus Christ. Some of us were taught that to worship together, to enter one another's places of worship was sinful. This service would not have happened 100 years ago. But thanks be to God, it is happening tonight.

When Cardinal George preached from this pulpit on February 15, 1998, he graciously agreed to meet over lunch with some of the leaders of this congregation and to respond to questions. Someone asked him what he thought the future held for ecumenical relations between Catholics and Protestants - I will never forget his answer.

He said it is helpful to remember that no one in the Vatican in the year 1515, could have predicted or imagined what the church would look like in

just 10 years. What happened in that interval, of course, was the Protestant Reformation.

It was a gracious reminder to Protestants from a Roman Catholic Archbishop that we may be responsible for our behavior in the future - but we do not control history. There is another player, one who says:

> **"Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it."**

In the exciting world of the Third Millenium, 21st Century, year 2000, I believe God is calling us to perceive a new creation, to follow with courage and boldness, to be open to new possibilities, new forms of the church, new mission, new responsibilities in the city and world to be embraced together. I think God is calling us to stop living out of the past and to begin living into the future, to acknowledge, for instance, that in this newly pluralistic, diverse world, old categories are not very important any more, and that what once defined us as Catholic and Protestant is not nearly as important as our common faith in Jesus Christ and our common commitment to be his people in the days ahead.

That is an exciting prospect and I'm grateful to begin it here, together, tonight.

Thanks be to God.